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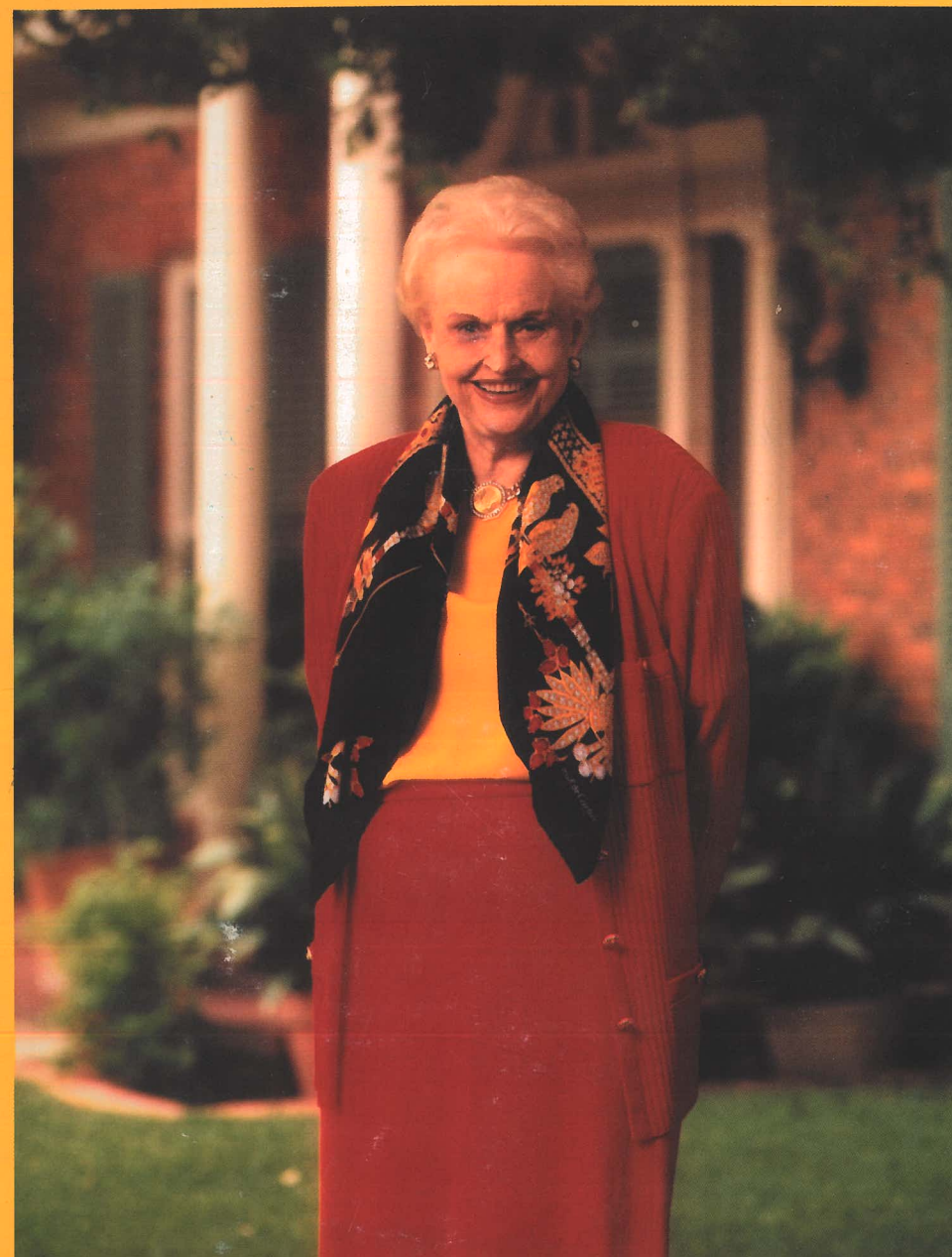
"I feel like I've lived several lives in one skin: youngster on a West Texas ranch; sorority girl at SMU; would-be movie star who had a screen test in Hollywood; business school graduate; first female pilot west of the Pecos; tourist in Germany the year before World War II; broken-hearted lover; wife; mother; actress; political activist; art collector and cancer survivor. One thing for sure, my life has not been dull. The first title I considered for this book was "Been There, Done That!"

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—Mary McComb

Mary-Go-Round

Mary McComb



# Mary-Go-Round



By Mary McComb

As told to Jim Comer

# *Mary-Go-Round*



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*Mary-Go-Round*



Mary McComb

Best of wishes to my two young  
friends - Happy Reading!  
Mary E. McComb



# *Mary-Go-Round*

By Mary McComb  
*As told to Jim Comer*



*“Don’t ever look back.  
That’s my philosophy.  
Don’t ever look back.”*

– Mary McComb  
September 2003



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## INTRODUCTION



I’m breaking my own rule about living fully in the present by taking time to look back over my life and share these memories with family and friends. However, I’ve always believed there is a time to break rules. I’ve been given so much by my Creator that it only seems right to get it down in print while I’ve still got my wits about me.

My life has been a full one, often overflowing with joy and richness. I’ve been blessed many times over, which is not to say there weren’t days I’ve had to hold on to my ass just to survive. That’s part of the roller coaster of life we ride on this earth. In these pages I have included the highs and the lows, because you can’t appreciate one without the other.

I feel like I’ve lived several lives in one body: youngster on a West Texas ranch; sorority girl at SMU; would-be movie star who had a screen test in Hollywood; business school graduate; first female pilot west of the Pecos; tourist in Germany in the year before the start of World War II; broken-hearted lover; wife; mother; actress; political activist; art collector and cancer survivor. One thing for sure, my life has not been dull. The first title I considered for this book was “Been There, Done That!”

I am grateful to God for many things, especially my sense of humor. I would never have made it to 86 without the ability to laugh at myself and my own foibles, as well as those of my fellow humans.

Through it all, I’ve tried to keep a sense of who I am and where I come from. My father always said, “If you know who you are, you can speak to anyone.” I’ve held on to that piece of advice, and now it’s my turn to speak to you.





## WEST TEXAS ROOTS



I come from a good family. As far as I know, none of my relatives is in the penitentiary.

Our family has roots in West Texas that go back to the 1860s. My mother's father, William Young, was appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant as the first post trader of Fort Stockton. They needed a fort there to protect the stagecoaches from Indian attacks. The first transcontinental railroad had just opened up, but it had a northern route.

My grandmother Young met my grandfather when he was in New Orleans looking up some of his relatives. He saw her climbing a mulberry tree and said, "Someday I'll be married to her." And he was. They had a big wedding in New Orleans, then he took her twelve hundred miles west to Fort Stockton by stagecoach. Grandmother carried her silver tea service on her lap. She was a Southern belle from Louisiana who grew up in a land of Magnolia trees, Mardi Gras, green grass and humidity. She moved to a land of no trees, dry weather, dirt, dust and cowboys who bathed irregularly. Despite the difficulties of frontier life, my grandparents prospered and raised a family of six children. Grandmother Young lived until 1917, the year I was born.



My father, H. L. Winfield, was born in 1888 and died in 1977. He saw Texas go from cattle trails to home of the National Space Program and, through his political career, helped make it the state it is today. He graduated from Draughan's Business College in San Antonio prepared to be a court reporter.

Dad met Mother when she was attending San Antonio Female College, now a part of Trinity University. After they married, they moved to her hometown of Fort Stockton, five hundred miles west of San Antonio. The town had about three thousand people surrounded by ranches with 50,000 head of cattle.

My parents married in 1909 and I was born in 1917. In the first seven years of their marriage, Mother lost five children. I was the only one who survived. If I was a little spoiled, you can understand why.

My father held various jobs in Fort Stockton, including a stint in the county clerk's office. When I was born, he wanted my arrival to be properly recorded. As a result, I was the first birth officially registered in Pecos County. That was one of my three firsts. In 1941, I was the first woman west of the Pecos to solo in an airplane. Later, I was the first woman to serve on the Board of Directors of the Pecos County State Bank.

My father was a natural-born leader and got into politics because people looked to him for advice. After establishing himself as a successful businessman, he ran for County Clerk of Pecos County and was easily elected. A few years later he was chosen Mayor of Fort Stockton. Dad was a damn smart man and people respected his judgment and integrity. He could give a good speech that an average person could understand. That was when politicians talked to people face-to-face, not in slick 30-second commercials.

Eventually the local Democratic leaders asked him to run for state senator. Since senate districts are based on population and

there aren't that many people in West Texas, his district – the 27th – had twenty-nine counties and was the largest in the state. It ran almost five hundred miles from Eagle Pass to El Paso. He quickly established himself as an outstanding and honest senator, as well as an expert on banking legislation.

He had a great sense of humor. During one session, long before air-conditioning, a senator was trying to filibuster a bill to death. He had been talking non-stop for almost three days and had just about run out of things to say. He was going down the alphabet of Texas counties and holding on to his desk so he wouldn't pass out. Finally, he got to the county of Washington and said, "This county was named after George Washington, first in peace, first in war and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

My Dad said, "He wasn't first in everything. He married a widow, didn't he?" Well, that comment broke up the chamber, and the long-winded senator ended his filibuster.

### Big Bend

Of all the things my father did as senator, the most important was the creation of what became Big Bend National Park. Dad sponsored the legislation that appropriated money to buy the land for a park larger than the State of Rhode Island.

At the time, people in Texas didn't think much of that wild, untamed country bordering the Rio Grande. They were still trying to recover from the Depression. However, some of Dad's



*Dad and his good friend, Governor Allan Shivers, talking politics in the capitol building.*



constituents felt it could be a great thing for their region. Jim Casner, Mayor of Alpine, Texas, was a strong supporter of setting aside the land and urged my father to introduce the legislation.

The town of Alpine sponsored a special train trip from Austin to Alpine so a group of legislators could see the land where the park would be. However, during the long ride, a big poker game got started in the club car. There was a lot of whiskey-drinking and cigar-smoking, and the game was not over when the train arrived in Alpine. Without wasting time on local dignitaries, the legislators moved the game to the hotel while the host committee waited in the hot sun to take them in a car caravan to the park.

After much urging from Senator Winfield to stop the game and get in the cars, Dad's good friend, Senator Weinert from Seguin, came up with a statesmanlike compromise. He told Dad to leave the room and wrote out a brief statement promising that "We the undersigned will vote for your Big Bend bill, if you don't make us go see the son of a bitch." All the poker players signed it, and the game continued. Only three senators, including my dad and Senator Weinert, went to see the land for the proposed park. The locals were left with a lot of empty automobiles. True to their word, the legislators went back to Austin and voted for it, but the bill was defeated by some uninformed non-poker players.

It was a long fight to get the appropriation of \$1.5 million. Dad had a hell of a time getting it through the legislature. The bill never did pass on its own. Eventually, Senator Weinert, came through with another good idea. He suggested introducing it as an amendment to the roadside park bill that Governor James Allred wanted as his legacy to the state. Only when attached to the governor's bill did the Big Bend appropriation finally pass.



*Dad's bowling ball was finally removed from the top of the First Presbyterian Church in Fort Stockton when I donated a cross designed by Cecil Casebier.*

### The First Presbyterian Bowling Ball

Daddy and Hood Mendel were both successful businessmen in Fort Stockton and active in the First Presbyterian Church. When it came time to raise funds for a new church, they were asked to be co-chairmen of the building committee. Everything went along fine until the architect came to Dad and asked what he wanted on the top of the church. He said, "A cross, of course."

You wouldn't think a cross would be controversial in a Christian church, but then you don't know West Texas. Some of the super-conservative ladies of the church would not hear of such an outrage. They told the architect that crosses went on Catholic churches, and they weren't about to be controlled by the pope. They threatened to scuttle the entire project if he dared to top the church with a "Catholic cross."

The dejected architect came back to my father and told him the cross had been vetoed. He asked Dad what his second choice was for the top of the church. Furious, my father said, "I don't give a damn. You can put a bowling ball up there!" So that's what they



did. The church was crowned by a big ball on a steeple. When they dedicated the building, the minister made up a story saying the ball represented the needy world. It was all b.s., and our family knew it. Dad raised the money, as promised, but never set foot in that church again.

More than sixty years later, I called the church's minister and told him I wanted to donate a cross for the steeple and would get Cecil Casebier, a Fort Stockton artist who had become famous and lived in San Antonio, to design it. The pastor was overjoyed to get rid of the eyesore that crowned his church and said they would be delighted. When they took down Dad's bowling ball, there were a number of bullet holes in it. I wondered if any of them came from my father's guns.

Dad was a state senator for almost twenty years. When W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel resigned as governor to run for the U.S. Senate in 1941, the Lieutenant Governor, Coke Stevenson, moved up to become governor. Since Daddy was the President Pro Tempore of the Texas Senate, that made him Acting Lieutenant Governor.

Dad was a good friend of Governor Stevenson and was planning on running for governor himself, but he couldn't do it because of me. He was spending a lot of time out of his district so I could have some exposure to city life. His opponents started making speeches about it. They said, "Hell, why should we elect him governor? He can't even decide where he wants to live." My parents' concern for my education may have cost Dad a shot at being governor.

Of course, I didn't appreciate their motives at the time. We had moved to San Antonio the summer before my senior year of high school. It was the worst thing that happened in my first sixteen years. I had gone to school in Fort Stockton all my life. Everyone knew me, and I was happy and well-liked. Suddenly my parents entered me in Thomas Jefferson High School, the first million-dollar high school in Texas, back when a million dollars was real money. After eleven years



*I was a bridesmaid in Jacqueline Noelke's wedding, San Angelo, 1940, and wonder what happened to that dress.*

of school in familiar surroundings, I found myself with hundreds of classmates who didn't know me and didn't care to.

My parents thought they were doing me a great favor by sending me to this fancy new school, but I didn't see it that way. I didn't know one soul, and the social groups had already been established. To them I was a West Texas hick and they had no time to waste on me. As a result, I spent one of the saddest years of my life. I didn't know what else to do, so I held my head high and just kept going.

Finally, in the spring, I tried out for the senior play, got a good comedy role and made the most of it. I was no longer nameless. After that, everybody knew who I was. People started speaking to me in the halls and inviting me to sit at their table for lunch. It was too late to save my senior year, but it helped me understand that I had a theatrical gift that could turn heads and open doors. For the first time I realized the power of my ability to communicate. I've rarely been at a loss for words since.





*If I had to go to business school in Boston, at least I had a fur coat to keep me warm.*

## ALMOST FAMOUS



After graduating from high school, I went to Southern Methodist University in Dallas and joined the Zeta Tau Alpha sorority. Following up on my success in the high school play, during my freshman year I auditioned for the Pigskin Parade, a musical revue put on by the SMU Band. To my surprise, I brought down the house. God had given me what Noel Coward called "a talent to amuse."

During my sophomore year, I was chosen to represent Pecos County as a duchess in the Sun Bowl Carnival in El Paso. No doubt the fact that my father was a state senator helped secure my selection. However I got there, I had a great time.

During the carnival, there was a contest among the princesses to win a trip to Hollywood for a screen test. A talent scout from Paramount Pictures watched us parade across the stage and chose me as the winner. That was big news back in the '30s and made all the papers. Everyone got excited, and it brought my father some good publicity, though he never dreamed anything would come of it.





Wally Westmore, did his makeup magic before my screen test at Paramount Studios.

Mother went along with me on the trip to California, because young ladies had chaperones in those days. Although her presence put a slight damper on my social opportunities, it was an exciting time.

I had my makeup done by the famous Hollywood makeup artist, Wally Westmore. There was another young girl sitting right across from me, and she kept telling Mr. Westmore to make her mouth look smaller. I

looked at the size of her enormous breasts and thought to myself, "Honey, you ought to be worried about something beside your mouth." Her name was Martha Raye and she was shooting a picture with Bing Crosby called "Waikiki Wedding."

After I'd done the screen test, the director told me, "You have some real potential, but you're young and inexperienced. Paramount will pay for you to study for two years at the Pasadena Playhouse, but don't expect to work right away."

I was thrilled, because the Pasadena Playhouse was one of the best acting schools in the country. Mother seemed happy for me and, as we headed back to Texas, I could already see my name on a movie marquee. But when we told Daddy that they had offered me a scholarship to study acting, he hit the roof. He said, "Absolutely not. No daughter of mine is going to be a damn actress."

And that was that. There was no arguing with my father when he'd made up his mind. He was a businessman and wanted me to carry on in his footsteps. He let me finish the year at SMU and then signed me up for Roger Babson's School of Business and Statistics in Boston. That was 3,000 miles from Hollywood, as far as you could get and not be swimming in the Atlantic Ocean. Fortunately, the second half of the course was held at a campus in Florida, where I learned to water ski.

I was deeply disappointed at missing the chance to become an actress, but accepted my father's decision. On some level I must have known he was right. As much as I would have enjoyed being in movies, this Pecos County girl might have been miserable in the make-believe world of Hollywood.



I may not have learned much business at Babson's Business College, but I learned to water ski at Cypress Gardens, Florida, 1938.





Sharing St. Mark's Square with the pigeons, Venice, 1938.

## EUROPE, 1938



I didn't become a star, but I was blessed with loving parents who gave me values and roots and opened many doors for me.

In the summer of 1938 I went to Europe with Mother and some ladies from Dallas, just one year before Hitler invaded Poland and World War II erupted. I got to see pre-war Europe as it would never be again. We visited Austria and Czechoslovakia while those once-free countries were ruled by the Nazis. I saw the German flag, with its evil swastika, flying in three countries.

We went to the Salzburg Music Festival when there were almost no other American tourists present, and they let us go up on top of the Opera House to see Hitler make his grand entrance. When we arrived, people had been standing in line for twenty-four hours to see the Führer pass by. Don't let anyone fool you. They were not scared of Hitler; they worshipped him. To them, he was a force of nature, somewhere between a god and a rock star.

We were waiting to see the man with the moustache when they told us there was a last-minute change of plans. Hitler was not coming. Instead, he sent his propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. When this was announced, the tour guide told us, "Don't take



Goebbels' picture because he has a club foot and is very sensitive about it." I guess his deformity didn't fit the image of the Aryan master race.

I paid no attention to the warning. I had a new movie camera and there was no way I was going to miss that moment. Sure enough, Goebbels came schlumping up the steps with his club foot, and I photographed him. I had the film developed in Germany and came home to Texas with historic pictures.

I wish I could tell you I still had that footage. Many years later I lent it to my daughter, Molly, and her husband to show to their friends. They stored the film in their attic, and it was destroyed by the Houston heat and humidity.

When we visited Prague, the lady who was conducting our trip invited Jewish people who had been forced out of business to see us privately in our hotel. Although they no longer had shops or businesses, they had kept some lace and crochet work and were desperate to sell them to have money to live. It didn't feel right to buy their remaining possessions, but we knew they needed money to stay alive.

When we were in Berlin, we went to a club where a number of SS men were standing around in their big black boots. The music was playing and suddenly this handsome German officer appeared at my table, bowed, and – in impeccable English – asked me to dance.

I have never been one to refuse a dance with a good looking man, so I said, "Yes", and within seconds we were on the dance floor waltzing to the oompah-pah band. He danced with skill, but with great formality and held me at a distance.

He said, "I would very much like to go to America."

I asked, "Why?"

He looked over at a couple who were dancing closely together and said, "Because in America you can dance cheek-to-cheek."

I told him, "We can do that, too," and I started to snuggle up to him. Instantly he drew back.

"No, no. The Führer would not approve. He would be furious. But someday I'll have my chance because we are going to America. The Führer has promised us we will be there for the New York World's Fair in 1939."

Hitler had told his troops that they would be coming to America one way or another. My dancing partner was certain of it. He was going to see the fair and march down the streets of New York. I don't know how Hitler had it figured out, but that's what his SS men believed.

Hitler usually did what he said he'd do. He said he'd remove the Jews from German life, and he did. He said he'd retake the ancestral German homeland of Austria and Czechoslovakia, and he did that, too. When Hitler said he would do something, by God it happened. His followers had no reason to doubt him.

When I got back to Texas in the fall of 1938, people asked me to talk about my trip and what I'd seen. I showed them the pictures and shocked them by saying that within the next few years, I felt sure America would be at war.

I'd seen the troops drilling in the streets with my own eyes. I could feel the power of the fanaticism that had swept through Germany. I had witnessed the persecution of the Jews. I told people that Americans would not stand by and see the destruction of an entire ethnic group. I said, "What they are doing to the Jews is incomprehensible and terribly wrong. Mark my words, we will soon be at war."

A lot of people thought I was crazy. They couldn't understand what I was saying. America was still trying to get out of eight years of depression. War was the furthest thing from anyone's mind, but I knew differently because I'd seen the Nazis up close.





*I was the first woman pilot west of the Pecos to solo - even though my father wouldn't let me join the Women's Air Force.*

## “SEE THAT REDHEAD STANDING BY THE DOOR? I’M GOING TO MARRY HER”



On January 1, 1941, my roommate, Annie Rooney, and I had returned to San Antonio from Christmas in Fort Stockton and decided to have dinner at La Fonda on Main Street. The restaurant was packed, and we were standing at the front door waiting for a table.

A group of Army Airmen was sitting across the room watching our entrance. One of them was a handsome pilot from Staten Island, New York, named Don Dominick Casio. He turned to his friend, gestured toward me and said, “See that redhead standing by the door? I’m going to marry her.”

His friend asked, “Who is she?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to marry her,” he said.

Later on, after we’d been seated, his friend came over to our table, introduced himself and offered to buy us a drink to celebrate the New Year.

We told him that we were Miss Winfield and Miss Rooney of Fort Stockton and appreciated his offer, but could not accept his generosity. We didn’t want him to think we could be picked up for





Don Dominick Casio, 1941.

the price of a drink. Then he shocked us by pulling out his wallet and showing us a picture of my own mother. He said that he was president of a local Lions Club and had just been out in Fort Stockton to help organize a club in our hometown. There he was in the picture with my mother and the Mayor.

He added, "By the way, I forgot to tell you that my friend is going to marry you."

I said, "I hope I get to meet him first."

He said, "You can meet him right now." He motioned for Don to come over to the table and introduced him to me.

Don said, "Did he tell you?"

"He did."

That charming New York Italian asked for my telephone

number, and I gave it to him. I spent the next three days sitting by the phone, waiting for it to ring. Finally, he called and said he'd been working in San Angelo for three days at the Air Force base there.

I asked him, "What made you choose me? My friend, Annie, is gorgeous. She always gets the attention."

He said, "You have something that she doesn't have – class." That kind of bullshit will do it to me every time. He had me hooked. He asked me out for a date and I said, "Yes." Within a few days he was introducing me to friends as his girl. His mind was already made up, and I was swept off my feet.

He was training in San Angelo during the week, and flew back to San Antonio to see me every weekend. On the night of our fifth date, in early February, he took me to the best restaurant in town, La Louisiane, and ordered champagne. Then he asked me to marry him.

I said, "I need to talk to my family, and they are in Austin at the legislature."

He told me he understood and that he'd call me the next night at my parents' suite in the Stephen F. Austin Hotel. We'd only had five dates before I agreed to marry him. On Saturday morning I drove him to Randolph Field and kissed him goodbye. That was the last time I saw him alive.

I drove up to Austin that afternoon, and when I got there my mother said, "For God's sake, call Annie. She's phoned you three times in the last hour."

I called her immediately, and she told me that Don had been killed in a plane crash.

When he had landed in San Angelo that Saturday after asking me to marry him, a sergeant at the air base had asked Don, "Can you take me up? I've got to get in some extra flying time."

Don said, "Sure. I've got something to celebrate and I'll give

you the ride of your life." I'm afraid he was showing off in that plane, and I knew it wasn't the first time. He had told me about flying loop-the-loops over the base, and I had told him "Please don't do that. Your number one job is self-preservation."

He said, "There's no way I'll crash. I'm too good a pilot."

One of the officers watching him said that they were coming back to land when their engine conked out. They had to cross the Concho River to get to the landing field, and Don was trying desperately to get the engine started again when he flew headfirst into the riverbank.

We had known each other less than seven weeks. Eighteen hours after he had proposed, he was gone. Mother and I drove out to San Angelo for his memorial service. I had to see him in the casket to believe he was dead. I met his brother and father who had come down for the service.

It took me a year to get over the shock of finding and losing Don so quickly. He had come into my life like a tornado, shaken the foundations of my world, and disappeared before I had a chance to catch my breath.

Six months later, in the summer of 1941, my parents and I drove to New York and visited his folks on Staten Island. They were a warm and prosperous family who ran a successful landscaping business. They asked me if I'd like to see his mausoleum and I said, "No." I wanted to remember him alive. They were lovely to us, but I wondered how well I would have fit into their world.

Don had told me, "One of the first things we are going to do after we get married is for you to take flying lessons." After his death, I decided to follow through with our plans and learn to fly. Daddy had some property between Fort Stockton and the ranch, and had given it to the town as an airport. They named

it Win-Field, so I learned to fly at my father's own airport, but had to keep it a secret from him.

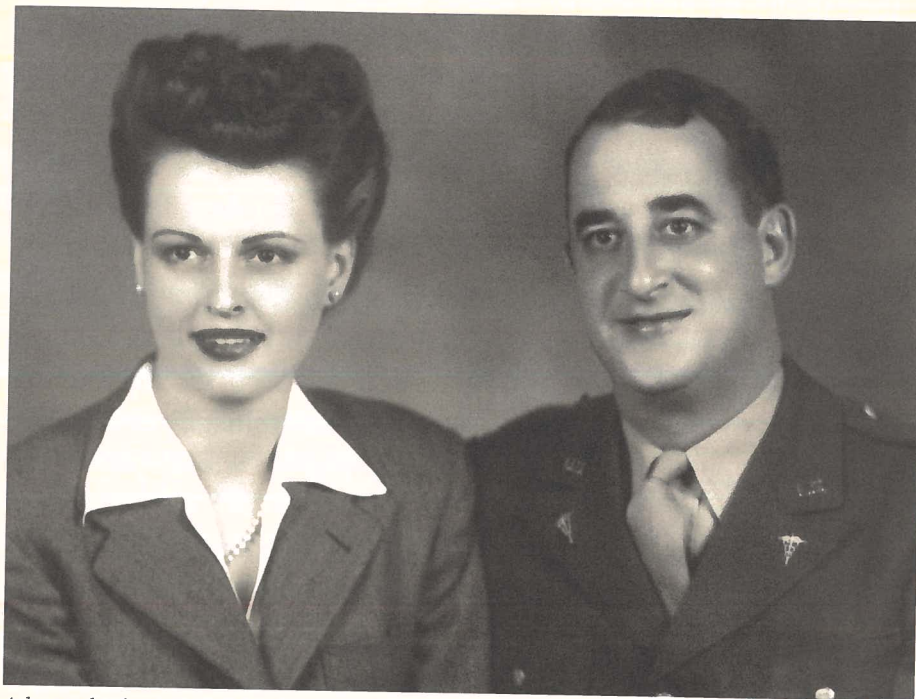
Everyone, including my flying teachers, knew Daddy would have a fit if he found out I was taking lessons to become a pilot, so they didn't let him know. I had a wonderful time flying all over West Texas, from Midland to El Paso to Alpine. I planned to use my skills to join the Women's Air Force.

The day I got my license, I went straight to my father and told him I was a certified pilot and was going to join the WAFS. He said, "Not if I have anything to say about it. No daughter of mine is going to be a damn pilot."

I was twenty-two and could vote. However, in my family, Daddy's vote was the only one that counted. He had veto power and exercised it loudly. Legally, he couldn't stop me from going into the WAFS, but he could use his political influence to keep me from getting accepted. I had no doubt that he would play every card in his hand.

On top of that, there was the enormous force of his personality. When he said "No," I didn't argue with him. In retrospect, flying had already served its purpose. The real reason I wanted to be a pilot was to help get over the loss of Don. While I'm still sorry I didn't get to join the WAFS, I'm glad that I let go of my grief and didn't give in to fear.





*Asher and I shortly before his departure for the front lines in Europe, 1943.*

## ASHER McCOMB



Asher McComb was an intelligent, cultivated man and a great surgeon.

He was born in Tennessee, but when his parents divorced, his mother came back to Texas to raise her only child in the South Texas town of Asherton. To her the old family homestead was Tara and Windsor Castle all rolled into one. She had a very high opinion of herself and her family.

Annie Rooney and I were sharing a room at the St. Anthony Hotel where they had a 45-cent lunch, which was a real bargain for businessmen nearby. I was dating a doctor, and he and Asher were best friends. Asher saw me at the hotel and told his friend he "liked the looks of that gal." The other doctor then announced that I was his girlfriend, even though he hadn't informed me of that fact.

Not long after that, the army transferred Asher to Midland, which is fairly close to Fort Stockton by Texas standards – about a hundred miles. He called me long-distance and said that Midland was a lonely place and would I mind if he came over to Fort Stockton to see me. We had a guest house, so that worked out fine. He came, and we had





Asher and I cut the wedding cake at our reception at the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio.

a great weekend. That was the first time he mentioned that he was planning to marry me. I said, "I don't know. I've got to wait until the same instinct hits me."

Asher proposed officially by telephone. We had talked about it a little, but he hadn't actually said the words out loud. He was down in Eagle Pass working in the hospital there as Chief Surgeon and called me long-distance from Piedras Negras. Long-distance was a big deal back then. It was saved for emergencies or news

of deaths and births. On top of that, our connection was scratchy, but I can hear his voice as if it were yesterday.

"Hello, Mary? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you."

"Will you marry me?"

I said, "Yes ... who's calling?"

There was a stunned pause, and then he broke out laughing. He told that story for the next forty-five years.

A few weeks later, I went down to Eagle Pass with Annie for a weekend and accepted his proposal. I said, "I'll marry you someday, but let's not make any specific plans."



My father is about to relinquish parental control on my Wedding Day, 1943.

Asher only heard the first part of that sentence. Six weeks later, in April of 1943, we were married at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in San Antonio and had our reception at the St. Anthony Hotel.

We got some beautiful wedding gifts, but none meant more than the one from the Texas Senate "Committee for Education." This group of legislators had nothing to do with reading and writing, but got together regularly to play serious poker. They loved my parents and me, and when I decided to get married, they wanted to give me a wedding present. They took the entire pot of a game they were playing – a formidable amount of money – and bought me a beautiful silver tray inscribed, "To Mary from the Committee for Education."

Asher and I drove to Mexico City for our honeymoon, because during the war, the only way to travel was in your own car or on a train. I was excited about seeing Mexico City, but as soon as we arrived, Asher headed for Acapulco and went deep-sea fishing, a sport in which I had no interest whatsoever. He caught three sailfish and was so proud of himself that he had them roped on top of our car for the return trip. Have you ever traveled for four days with the windows down and two dead fish above your head? He drove fast and told everyone he couldn't slow down, because the buzzards would take over or his bride would jump out of the car.

When we got to customs in Nuevo Laredo, I got out and sat on the curb. I told him, "It's either me or the sailfish. I'm not going one more mile in that smelly car."

He said, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

He took off ninety miles an hour for the express office and had those damn fish sent to Nowotny, a well-known San Antonio taxidermist. They had to get them mounted fast before the worms got them. Later, when Asher discovered the price of mounting his prize fish, he decided not to claim them.





Asher and I - and three smelly sailfish he caught - on our honeymoon, Acapulco, Mexico, 1943.

A few years later, he went hunting with my dad. On the way home they stopped by Nowotny's to have a deer head mounted. Of course, Dad introduced his son-in-law, and Mr. Nowotny said that he knew that name well. Asher felt terrible but kept his mouth shut.

When we moved into our first house in San Antonio, I walked into the living room, and there was one of the sailfish on the wall. I said, "What in the hell is that?" Asher replied, "It's one of our honeymoon sailfish. Your father got it out of hock for us." I had to live with that thing for the next forty years! After Asher died, I told my yard man to take that fish half-way to Eagle Pass, crawl over a fence and place it under a mesquite tree. I wanted to imagine the look on the face of the person who found it.

I didn't get along too well with Asher's mother. We went down to Asherton on the Sunday after he got his orders to go overseas in



Asher loved hunting on the Sibley ranch and I didn't. But I could smile for the camera because I am a good actress.

December, 1943. His mother started ranting and raving about the Germans. "Anybody in the United States who has one drop of German blood in them should be put in a concentration camp." That performance was strictly for my benefit, because she knew my grandparents were German.

We had friends who had come with us that day and had no idea that they were going to get mixed up in a family drama. I still remember how uncomfortable and embarrassed all of us were. I'm sure they were waiting for me to respond in my usual style to Mrs. McComb's insults, but somehow I kept my mouth shut. However, when I got up from that table, I knew it was the end for my mother-in-law and me.

Asher's mother was an educated woman with a college degree in Spanish. Naturally, she always made a big point of speaking Spanish as fast as she could when I was around. I couldn't understand a damn word. I'd say, "Asher, why don't you say something to her?" He'd say, "Mary, it's easier not to start an argument. Just grin and bear it."

His mother said that she wanted to come to San Antonio more frequently, so she could take me to the symphony and teach me a little culture. She wanted to prepare me for being Mrs. Asher.

I told her, "I'm sorry, but I did not marry a rich man. I have to go back home and get a job until the war is over, and we can put things together." When Asher went overseas, I left town and moved back to Fort Stockton. I never saw her again.

I worked in Fort Stockton at Gibbs Field, in the Supply Department. Annie Rooney, and her sister worked there too. We



had a lot of cadets who came in for one shoe at a time, just to hang out with us.

While I handed out uniforms, Asher was Chief Surgeon of a M.A.S.H. unit that cared for critically wounded soldiers, and was constantly on the move. When the TV program *M.A.S.H.* came on many years later, Asher and I understood it on many levels. At the end of the war, Asher was among the first Americans to arrive at the infamous Dachau concentration camp. When he got there, the Germans were trying to dispose of tens of thousands of dead bodies. They had stacked them in railroad cars like cordwood. He saw starving Jews who had been imprisoned for years wandering around in a daze, overcome by their liberation.

Asher didn't like to talk about what he had seen at Dachau. The sights, sounds and smells of the camp had a profound effect on him. He told me, "You could smell the stench of burning bodies twenty miles away." He had little sympathy with the claims of local citizens that they didn't know what was going on behind the walls. I heard him say many times, "Few people can imagine the horrors of the concentration camps, but I know because I was there."

After the Allied victory in Europe in May, 1945, Asher came back to San Antonio and was stationed at Brooke General Hospital. He told me that he couldn't get out of the army until the war with Japan was over. What he didn't tell me at the time was that he was awaiting orders any day to go to the Far East and participate in the expected invasion of the Japanese homeland. This campaign was likely to cause more than a million American and Japanese casualties. None of us had any idea there was such a thing as an atomic bomb. The day we heard about the bombing of Hiroshima, Asher said, "Thank God," because he knew the war would be over soon, and there would be no "Battle of Japan." He would have been part of that operation and did not expect to return alive.

Not long after Asher got back home, his mother's health declined and she headed to Monterey, Mexico, for a rest cure. She hired a driver, but apparently didn't pick a good one. During the trip to Mexico their car careened off a steep road, and she was killed instantly. She died like Princess Grace, only without her good disposition. She was so unhappy seeing Asher and me together, I guess the Lord knew what He was doing.

After he was discharged from the army, Asher started practicing medicine again. He went in with Dr. Charles Venable, a highly respected orthopedic surgeon. Asher was a general surgeon and did a lot of work on gall bladders. He was a wonderful doctor and had an excellent reputation, and was a member of state and national medical organizations.

I did everything that I was supposed to do to support his career. I even joined the Episcopal Church. I told a friend that I didn't know how to spell Episcopalian. When Asher heard that, he said, "That's all right. She was raised Presbyterian and can't spell that either."

I tried to persuade Asher to buy a plane, so I could do some more flying. He sat me down with a pencil and paper and showed me how much it would cost to operate, and convinced me it would be cheaper to lease. I didn't argue because common sense was on his side.

Doctors don't put in forty-hour weeks, and their time is never fully their own. Asher often worked sixty to seventy hours a week. He was in surgery during the day and made rounds at night. As a woman married to a successful doctor, I realized I needed to create a life for myself and use my own talents. In the late '40s, I got involved with the San Antonio Little Theater and stayed active in it for more than twenty-five years. I never became a Hollywood star, but acting gave me a great deal of joy.





Rehearsing for a production at the San Antonio Little Theater.

One of my favorite plays was the "The Women," written by a talented and powerful woman, Clare Booth Luce, who was married to the founder of *Time* Magazine. The play featured an all-woman cast. I did that show two times, and both times I played the Rosalind Russell role – the bitch. I know it's hard to believe that casting!

I did the *Marriage Go Round*, *The Tender Trap* and lots of romantic comedies. I was in so many shows over the years that I can't remember them all now. I've kept the clippings in photo albums, but that's not what matters. Newspaper reviews turn yellow with age, but memories stay bright.

Asher had a delightful sense of humor and was a wonderful storyteller. He loved to tell about the time he was a college student living in Virginia. The only stipulation that his mother made was that



Publicity shot for the San Antonio Little Theater.

he had to go to church every Sunday. One Sunday he had a terrible hangover, but got up and went to the eleven o'clock service. He was sitting on the second row when the preacher said, "Hear the Word of God: 'The children of Asher shall be 10,000.'" Even though the minister was referring to one of the twelve tribes of Israel, Asher said he couldn't get a date for the next six months.

Asher's stepfather, Brooke Payne, had an uncle named Richard Brooke who was a well-known artist. His painting, "A Pastoral Visit," hangs in the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. We have a similar work that probably should be in a museum, but I'm glad it's on a wall in Asher's study. A powerful painting showing three black men engaged in a deep conversation about God, it is called "The Theological Discussion."



Asher's stepfather served in the military and was sent to China to help put down the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. While he was in Asia, he bought many works of art, including some exquisite china that I didn't see until we inherited it. I proudly put the Chinese china in a place of honor in our dining room. A few months later we had a party for Asher's old Virginia Military Institute friends. One of the wives took a look at our china and said, "Do you have any idea what you have here?"

I said, "Yes, very pretty china."

"Not just pretty china," she said. "That's Canton."

I figured I was supposed to know what that meant. I smiled and said, "Yes, of course it is."

I had no idea what Canton was, so the next time I visited Gump's in San Francisco, I said, "Tell me something about Canton." The sales lady looked down her long nose as if I was from a ranch in West Texas. She had my number, but I had the china.

In an aristocratic tone she informed me, "Canton was made for the Chinese royal family." She told me the century, but I can't remember whether it was A.D. or B.C. One thing for certain, it was old and it was valuable. She said the dishes always had a dragon on them, and the oldest pattern has five toes. The more toes the dragon has, the more valuable the china is.

When I came home, I got out the china. Asher said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "Counting toes."

He said, "Now I know for sure you're crazy."

I wasn't crazy, I was doing archeological research, and soon discovered that half of our china had five toes.

### First Class

Asher belonged to the National Association of Blood Banks, and they had a national meeting every year in Scottsdale, Arizona. We'd always go to that. Once in a while they'd have a convention in Hawaii. They'd give Asher a first class ticket, and he'd trade it in for two coach tickets so I could go, too. One year he said, "Look, we've got to do something about this Hawaii trip, because I want to go first class."

I said, "You go first class, and I'll go with you, and I'll pay for my own ticket."

I found that it helped to have some money of my own, because I didn't feel dependent. Asher liked that too. That year we went to Honolulu first class. We had just taken off from Los Angeles, and they were serving a beautiful meal in first class. The stewardess was slicing roast beef off of a cart, and Asher was in heaven. Suddenly there was an announcement over the intercom.

"Is there a doctor on board?"

I nudged him and said, "Asher..."

Very quietly he said, "Look, I've waited all my life to get up here in first class, and I'm enjoying it. The rear end of the plane is filled, and I'm sure there's a doctor back there."

Soon there was another announcement.

"Please, is there a doctor on the plane?"

I said loudly, "Yes, here's one."

He said, "I'm going to kill you."

Well, he went back and found a man lying in the aisle. While Asher took his vital signs, the prostrate fellow told him, "I've never flown before, and I'm panicked about it. A bunch of us were out partying last night, and I have a terrible hangover." Asher assured him that he'd be all right and told the pilot to call ahead and have an ambulance meet the plane. After a while, the



passenger calmed down, and Asher got to come back to first class and finish his roast beef.

While Asher was giving first aid, the stewardess told me that on their last flight someone had died.

I said, "What do you do when someone passes away in flight?"

She said, "We put them in the toilet and lock the door. But this man's wife would not give him up. She held on to him tight and would not allow us to move him. We covered him with a blanket, and by the time we got to Hawaii rigor mortis had set in. They couldn't put him on a stretcher so they had to carry him out of the plane in a sitting position."

Our favorite trip was to South Africa. We rode the famous Blue Train from Johannesburg to Cape Town. It was elegant beyond belief. They served all the meals on real china, with sterling silver, and the finest crystal. On that train, there were no plastic forks.

In Cape Town, we stayed in a Hilton across from the train station. We were told not to go out in the streets at night, because it was not safe. Despite the warnings, one doctor's wife had seen something she wanted in a store window three doors from the hotel, so they went out after dinner, got mugged and ended up in the hospital. Amazingly, the robbers did not take their jewelry or money. All they wanted were their passports.

The muggers spoke Spanish and that alerted the police to their identities. There was a Cuban ship docked in town and some of the sailors were desperate to get American passports, so they could get out of Cuba and into the United States.

### Chandeliers and Subways

In 1954, we were looking for a chandelier for our dining room, and I found one in San Antonio that cost a couple of thousand dollars. I told Asher about it, and he said, "Now, make up your mind. Do you want a chandelier, or do you want to go to Europe? Because we can't do both."

I said "Let's take the trip. The chandelier can wait." So we went to Europe that summer, and when we got to Paris, we heard about a famous flea market that had great bargains. Many Europeans were still struggling from the aftermath of the war and sold antiques to tourists for cash.

We got the directions to the bazaar and rode as far as we could on the Paris Metro. When we arrived, the number of antiques was overwhelming. After seeing what they had on display, Asher said, "With a little luck, you may get your chandelier today."

We tried not to look too interested, but it was hard to keep from getting excited. When I saw the perfect chandelier, I signaled to Asher, and he went to work. I had no idea how much to offer. I figured if we could get it for a thousand dollars, along with the sconces, we'd be lucky.

Finally, he pointed to the one I liked and said to the owners, "How much is that one?"

"\$750."

He turned up his nose and said, "Too much."

As he walked away, I stood there saying, "Son of a gun. . . ."

He gave me a dirty look and said, "Shhh."

The owner called him back and after some heavy bargaining, we got the chandelier and sconces for just \$500, which was a fortune to them and a bargain to us. I was amazed at Asher's negotiating skills, but shouldn't have been. After all, he got me!





*Christmas Day, 1988, in Monte Carlo.  
I look like I won.*

Once the haggling was over and we were the proud owners, I said, "How are we going to get these home?" Asher said, "No problem." He put them in a box and balanced it on his shoulders. We took the subway all the way back to town, got off at the American Express office and had them pack it up and send it home. That \$500 chandelier has been hanging in our dining room ever since.

### **Foot in Mouth**

Asher used to do a lot of sterilizations. Men used to arrive at his office, get fixed and walk out very slowly. One Sunday, Asher told me a doctor friend from Houston was coming in for a procedure and that we would meet for lunch afterward.

When I got to the restaurant, I said, "Asher tells me you had some minor surgery." I felt Asher kick me under the table. I said, "Uh-oh. I must have said something wrong, because he just kicked the hell out of my right foot."

The Houston doctor said, "If you look at me more closely, you'll see that I'm walking straddle-legged. Don't you think that five children are enough?"

I said, "God, yes."

He said, "Well, thanks to your husband there won't be any more."

Asher was ten years older than I was. He was born in 1908, and died in 1988. Until his mid-seventies, he was healthy and led a full, active life. For years, he suffered from high blood pressure

and had a severe stroke when he was seventy-five. He was sick for about five years, and in his last two years required full-time care in a nursing home.

That was hard on everyone – Asher most of all. He used to say, "I didn't plan for a life like this."

He was not a bad patient, but an unhappy one. He could no longer be self-sufficient and help others. One night in his last year, I had been visiting for several hours and told him I had to leave because I had work to get done.

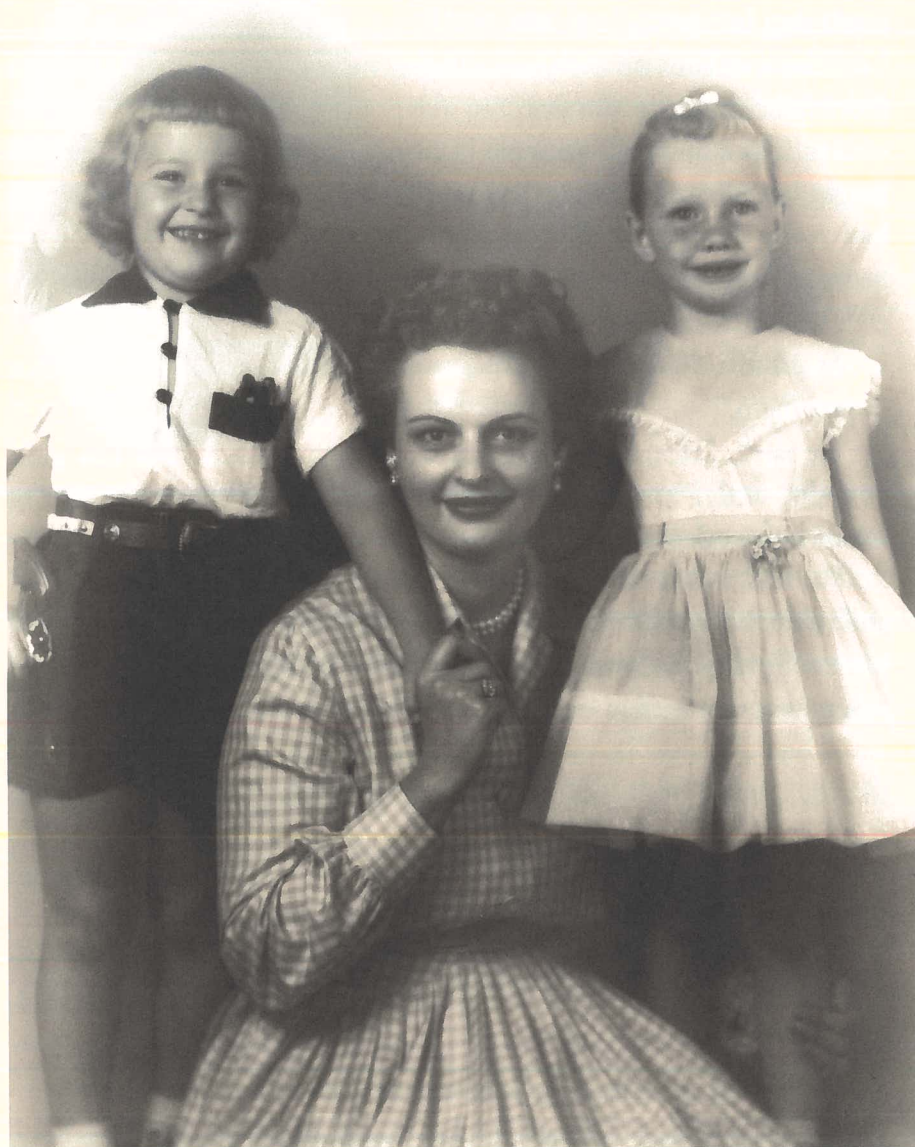
He said "What are you going to do?"

I told him, "Write checks. We've got bills stacked up, and I've got to pay them."

He said, "Honey, I don't know how you do it, but I'm glad you do, and I appreciate it." I'm glad I was able to be strong when he needed me.

We had a long and happy marriage, but when the doctor called and told me that he had passed away peacefully, I said, "Thank God." I knew he was ready to go. For a person like Asher, dependence on others was worse than death.





*My daughters: the cowgirl and the lady.*

## CHILDREN



Asher and I wanted to have children, but the biology didn't quite work. I thought I was the problem. Our doctor friends suggested we go to a fertility clinic in Dallas, and we did. We both took every test known to man. Eventually we found that the problem stemmed from Asher's work in the M.A.S.H. units during World War II. On the battlefield, he had to do his own X-rays, back when that technology was new. His mobile unit didn't have the proper protection, and his repeated exposure to X-rays made him sterile.

It didn't cut down on his potency, but made it impossible for us to have children. The doctors told us if we wanted children, there were lots of them who needed adopting. We applied at a number of Texas adoption organizations and told them to get the word out.

Three months later, a doctor called and said that he had a baby for us from a wonderful family. We had asked for a boy, but he had a newborn girl, and we said that we'd love to have her. Suddenly, without the usual nine-month waiting period, we were





Leaving St. Luke's Episcopal Church with Margaret and Molly, 1951.



Our nightly ritual: reading to the girls.

parents. We named our first daughter after me and my best friend, Margaret Griffin. Her name is Mary Margaret.

Seven months later, we got a call from another doctor. He said, "I'm not going to let you say 'No', because the genes she's inheriting are better than yours and Asher's."

I said, "Let's take her. Two babies are no more trouble than one." I soon found out that was not the case, but I'm so grateful we took both girls.

I have had many comments about the girls' ages, because they are only seven months apart. The foreman at our ranch said "What's the difference in them kids' ages?"

When I told him seven months, he said, "Damn, you must have gotten pregnant with the second one before you got out of the hospital with the first."

I told Asher that since I named the first girl, the second was his to name.

Being the Texas rancher that he was, he said, "Well, I want to name them with the same initials, MM, so we can brand them both with the same iron."



Asher, the girls and me in front of our house.

He came home one day and said, "I found the name for our daughter: Molly Malone."

I said, "That sounds like a brand of sausage."

We both liked Molly, so we had one name to go. He had a terrific secretary named Marie, so that's how we came up with Molly Marie.

Looking back on it, I think Molly Malone might have been more appropriate, because darling Molly is quite spirited and that name fits her.

My children are great girls. Both have been married twice, and both are happy now. Margaret was 53 in February, 2003 and Molly was 53 that September.

### Margaret

Margaret, my oldest daughter, went to Texas Tech and then spent a year in England to take a special course in Montessori education. After being in England for a year, she got motivated to study, went to Trinity University in San Antonio, got her





*Molly and Margaret all grown up.*

degree and started teaching.

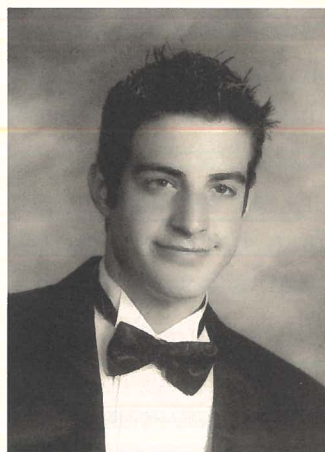
On a trip with me to New Mexico, I introduced her to a fellow I knew who owned a jewelry shop. I had been one of his customers and thought he and Margaret would enjoy knowing each other. How right I was. Within a short time, they became engaged.

He is from an old family in Pettus, Texas, and his name is Robert Milam Pettus.

They got married, but there were problems from the start. Margaret soon realized that they were not compatible, but then found out that she was pregnant. She knew she wanted that baby, but didn't want to be married to Rob. I don't think he wanted to be married to her, either. So they got a divorce. It was not amicable at the time, but since then they have become friends, and he's extremely proud of his son, Thomas.

After the divorce, Margaret came home and rented a little house here in San Antonio. About two years later her ex-boyfriend came to town. His name is Jay Czar. His father's family came from Austria where their name was Von Czar. When they got to Texas, they dropped the Von. Jay was in town visiting his mother, and he called me up and said, "What's happened to Margaret?"

I said, "She's divorced and has a sweet baby and is raising him by



*Grandson Thomas Winfield Pettus Czar, Margaret's son.*

herself." Jay looked her up, and they started dating again. Eventually they got married and moved to New Mexico where Margaret said she would never set foot again.

Margaret and Jay live in Albuquerque and have a loving marriage. A few years ago, Margaret's son, Thomas, decided on his own to have his name changed to Thomas Winfield Pettus Czar. He told his parents, "Rob is my father and Jay is my dad." Thomas graduated from high school in 2002 and is attending the University of Kansas.

At one point, Jay was manager of the Albuquerque airport. It's the only airport in the US that serves military and civilian planes, because it's near Alamogordo, where they made the bomb during World War II.

Jay is now the City Manager of Albuquerque, which is an extremely demanding job. He was ready to retire a few years ago and take a job in the private sector, but the city elected a new mayor who begged him to stay on.

### **Molly**

Molly married Rick Hagemeister, a young man she met in San Antonio, in 1972. They had two children, Robert Brooke Hagemeister and Martha Logan Hagemeister.

When Robert was born, Rick was so excited that he called his old roommate from Stanford, Robert Winthrop, and said that he was naming his son after him. Robert is now a grown man with a family of his own. He married a beautiful girl named Amanda, and they have a son named Asher. That makes me a great-grandmother, and I do my best to live up to the title.

Robert has a degree in Motion Picture and Television Production, with special certification in film editing. He is taking coursework in advanced screenwriting and has submitted short films to several film festivals in the Southwest. Amanda will soon





Robert Hagemeister, Molly's son, with his wife, Amanda, and their son, Asher.



My granddaughter, Martha Hagemeister, is now in law school at Vanderbilt.

have her B.A. in Education and hopes to teach at the middle school level in Phoenix.

Martha was named after my dear friend Martha Winter. She graduated with honors from Stanford University, worked for two years in Manhattan and loved it, and is now in law school at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Martha plans to return to New York when she completes her law degree.

Molly and Rick got a divorce in 1985.

In 1986, Molly married Craig Smithfield, and they now live in Phoenix. Craig is a great guy, very smart, and he and Molly adore each other. They get along so well that they even work together in a mortgage business. I admire their compatibility because I would have lasted about an hour as Asher's nurse.



I may be a tiny bit prejudiced, but have you ever seen a cuter young man? That's my great-grandson, Asher Hagemeister, who was named after my late husband.





*All dressed up with Mom and Dad in downtown San Antonio in the late '30s.*

## I LOVED SAN ANTONIO EVEN BEFORE THE SPURS



I've been a resident of San Antonio since 1940. If my math is correct, that's sixty-three years. I've lived on the same street since 1948. I guess you could say I enjoy stability.

People often comment that my street is so wide you could land a plane on it. That was the original idea. The land was owned by Robert Tobin, who was a pilot in World War I, and Mr. Burr, also a combat pilot. They wanted to have an airstrip between their two properties, so the street was designed as a runway. At the time, this area was considered the edge of town. After World War II, there was so much demand for property that they decided to turn it into large home lots.

Even the name of my street is an accident. It was supposed to be called Senesa Road, but when the city workers came out to map it, they misread the name, which was written on a piece of paper tied to a post. By mistake, they named it Geneseo Road, and the wrong name stuck. Ironically, one of the first couples to build a home on the street was from Geneseo, New York. They must have felt right at home.





*Sylvia Rico has been my maid and close friend for almost forty years.*

I love continuity. My maid, Sylvia Rico, has been with me for nearly four decades. To be honest, I don't know if it's thirty-six or thirty-eight years. She started working for me temporarily and just stayed on. She doesn't have many relatives, so we are family. We get along well, but Sylvia never learned English. In self-defense, I improved my Spanish. I'm not saying I could interpret for the United Nations, but I can make myself understood. I can bitch about things bilingually. I also speak the international language: cash.

Before she moved in about fifteen years ago, I used to drive Sylvia to the bus stop. There was a Luby's cafeteria on the corner, and many nights we'd go in there and eat supper together. It was easier than coming home and fixing something for myself. One of my snooty Terrell Hills friends observed us enjoying our meal, and the next time she ran into me, said, "Mary, do you and your maid go out to dinner together often?" I said, "No, but sometimes I eat with my best friend who happens to be my maid." That shut her up.

## ART



My father told someone jokingly that he had the most artistic daughter in the world. She could draw checks.

I might not be able to paint or sculpt, but one of my passions is art. I love my paintings and enjoy them every day. Being raised in West Texas, I grew up starved for beauty, whether it's out my window or on a canvas. If I allow myself one luxury, it is buying art.

I inherited my love of art from Dad. When he was president of the bank in Fort Stockton, there was an old man who had a big Cadillac. He had taken everything out of the back seat and filled it with trays of art. He was always coming up to the bank and trying to sell pieces to Dad. The Board of Directors told my father that they couldn't spend the bank's money buying art, so he bought it himself. Back in the depression, very few people were purchasing art, and he got some excellent work inexpensively.

I'm inadvertently responsible for many of the paintings that President Lyndon Johnson owned. It started at a University of Texas Board of Regents meeting at the Lutcher Brown estate here in San Antonio. A gifted local artist, Porfirio Salinas, was there selling his work.





*I'm standing in front of two prized paintings by Porfirio Salinas.*

He was a patient of Asher's and thought my husband hung the moon. That day Salinas was selling his Texas landscapes and I found one that I loved. I asked, "How much is it?"

He said, "\$1500."

"Too much," and walked on. I'd learned a lot from Asher's bargaining techniques in Paris.

Salinas followed me a few steps and announced, "I understand Governor Connally is upstairs. If you can introduce me to him, you can have the painting for \$750."

I knew Salinas had been to Connally's ranch, climbed the fence and painted every damn thing in sight, including the private air strip. We used to go down there for parties and I was amazed to see all the airplanes flying in. They valet-parked planes like cars at a country club.

"Come with me," I said. I took him by the hand and we headed upstairs. I knew they were having a coffee break and sure enough, I saw the Governor put his cup down as we walked in the room.

"John, I want you to meet Mr. Porfirio Salinas. He's a great painter, a good friend of mine and a patient of Asher's. He's an admirer of yours and is anxious to meet you."

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Salinas, but I don't need paintings as much as my friend, Lyndon Johnson, does."

As a result of that meeting, Connally got Salinas and Johnson together, and Lyndon bought everything Salinas had with him. When LBJ was president, the White House was full of western art, much of it by Salinas.

My next-door neighbors, Ruby and John Peace, were very close to John Connally. Ruby has been up to see Lady Bird in Johnson City several times and told me about the large number of Salinas paintings hanging at the ranch. Eventually, Salinas was able to retire because of the commissions he got from wealthy art patrons after his sales to President Johnson. I couldn't have been happier for him.

The artist's well-earned fame wasn't so bad for me, either. After his association with LBJ, his work increased greatly in value. I had one of his paintings appraised in 1988, when Asher died, and it was worth \$22,000 back then. I have three paintings by Salinas in my home, and I treasure each of them.





## ROCK AND LIZ AND ME



I had an old friend who owned a ranch in West Texas near Marfa, which was not the most glamorous spot in the world, until the producers of the film, *Giant*, showed up. They leased his property and hired him to chauffeur the stars, Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor. He soon discovered that the leads were extremely close and affectionate. In fact, he had to adjust the rear-view mirror to keep track of what was going on in the back seat. He said it was a better show than what was being filmed. One time he got so involved watching them that he drove off the road into the mesquite and almost had a wreck.

After hearing about all the fun they were having, I felt a sudden need to visit Marfa. My friend got me on the set where I ate lunch with the cast and crew under a big tent. Everyone was friendly, but Rock and Liz were nowhere to be seen. After lunch I wandered around, hoping to run into them. Sure enough, I found them sitting on the steps of a trailer. I introduced myself and we chatted for a few minutes. Then I asked if I could take their picture. Rock said, "Sure," and before he could change his mind – or put on a shirt – I got my shot and a piece of movie history.



## THE BUSINESSMEN IN MY LIFE



I've been fortunate to have intelligent, astute and caring men in my life including a loving, strong-willed father and a brilliant, successful husband. My Dad and Asher are gone and my children live in New Mexico and Arizona. However, I am blessed with four men who help make my life run smoothly. Each plays a different role, but their combined efforts keep this 86-year-old in pretty good shape. Dick Brady manages my legal affairs and, so far, has kept me out of jail. Jerry Letch looks after my investments, and checks up on me regularly. John Joseph has arranged my travel for many years and helped me to enjoy some of the great trips of my life. And Phil Christa has the most demanding job of all, keeping me beautiful twice a week and up on the latest news.

I'll give these four gentlemen great credit for putting up with my occasional eccentricities. They have heard my stories more than once and continue to laugh at my jokes. God bless them for their patience and kindness. They've seen me through ups and downs, ailments and aches. One thing for sure: I know they care about me and are always in my corner. I wouldn't trade any of them for the world.



### Dick Brady

Dick Brady is one of the finest lawyers in San Antonio and I've been fortunate to work with him for twenty-five years. He knows the law, the oil business and me. Most importantly, in a profession not always famed for moral consciousness, he is a man of great loyalty and high integrity.



### Jerry Letch

Jerry Letch has been an outstanding financial counselor for thirty-five years and I value his knowledge and friendship. He is always there when I need him. Jerry often accompanies me to lunch at my favorite table at the San Antonio Country Club and, if he didn't have such a beautiful wife, we might raise eyebrows.



### Phil Christa

I see Phil, my hairdresser, twice a week, no matter what. My travel schedule is arranged around his appointments. He is a valued friend, wonderful conversationalist, and one of my windows to the world. We share stories, swap gossip and give each other good advice.



### John Joseph

Molly met John Joseph when he was an airline agent working at a downtown hotel. He sold her a ticket and promptly called her up for a date. They have remained good friends over the years and when John started his own travel agency, I was happy to bring him business. He arranged many wonderful trips for me and a group from the San Antonio Little Theater.





*Wearing a hard hat at the Deep Test Well on the Winfield Ranch outside Fort Stockton, Texas.*

## JOKES, MONEY & POLITICS



### Jokes

One of my favorite things in life is telling a good joke. Sometimes I tell them to keep the tears from coming. When I was at the Mayo Clinic and about to have an operation for cancer of the liver, they rolled me into this room where they prepare you for the operating table.

I'll tell you, I was scared. Molly was there with me, but she had already kissed me goodbye and said, "I'm going down to the chapel."

The doctors asked, "May we stick this needle in here?" I said "Sure, go ahead. Ahh." Then I thought to myself, "It's time for a joke."

I said, "Do you know what a goose can do that a duck can't do...that everyone wants their doctor to do?" Then I said, "I think I'm getting drunk."

The anesthesiologist said, "You ought to be, but first give us the punch line."

"Stick his bill up his ass."

That line made me a celebrity at the Mayo Clinic. Doctors and



nurses from all over the hospital stuck their heads into my room and said, "Are you the lady who tells the jokes?"



Here's one of my favorites. This old man was cleaning his liquor closet and he had a house man working for him and he said, "Would you like this bottle of bourbon?"

And the house man said, "Oh, yes, sir. Yes, sir."

About a week went by and he asked his servant, "You never said anything about the bourbon I gave you. How was it?"

He said, "It was just right. Just right."

"What do you mean 'just right'?"

"Well, if it had been any better you wouldn't have given it to me. And if it had been any worse, it would have killed me. So it was just right."



I love the story of the old couple who were celebrating their anniversary.

The ninety-year-old man was in an amorous mood and said, "Ma, can you reach the night stand?"

She said, "Yes. Why?"

He said, "Hand me my teeth. I'm going to bite you, you little devil."

### Money

My father bought the ranch out in Pecos County back in 1929 and paid \$28,000 for it. When people ask me how big it is, I say forty sections. There are 640 acres a section. You do the math. All I know is that it's big.

When I was twelve years old, Dad drove me to the top of Five Mile Hill, and we looked down at the ranch. He pointed at that rough, dry, godforsaken West Texas land and said, "Don't ever sell this. As long as you have it, you'll never be broke. And someday it's going to make you some real money."

For the last seventy-odd years, that land has made it possible for me to have an independent income and pay my own way. I believe the wife having some money helps in a marriage. It's also allowed me to help others.

I've done my best to be careful with my resources. Almost sixty years ago, I sold my bank stock in Fort Stockton for \$25,000. That was a lot of money in those days and I wanted to invest it wisely. I picked out four lots near our home on Geneseo Road. Once again, my father intervened. He said, "You don't need to buy land. We're at war. Buy war bonds." So I did. Every once in a while I calculate what I would have made if I'd bought those lots. The people who bought them later sold them for \$700,000.

The Ellenberger formation is a geological stratum that runs under much of Pecos County, including the Winfield Ranch. Unfortunately the natural gas reserves are almost five miles down. In 1998, a group of international investors leased a site on our ranch where they thought they could drill successfully. This Deep Test cost millions of dollars, but we felt it would yield enormous returns. Before they started drilling, we had a big barbecue to mark



the occasion. I invited guests from San Antonio and when we got to the site, there was a tall tower. We took an elevator to the top and, while I was up there looking out over those desolate acres, I heard an out-of-state investor say, "Did you ever see so much of nothing in all your life?"

I didn't tell them who I was, but after lunch I got my chance to respond. I ordered champagne to be served in tin cups and when they toasted me, I stood up and told everyone what I'd overheard on the tower. I said, "I believe the Lord makes everything equal. What He didn't put on top of the ground – all these acres of 'nothing' – maybe He put under the ground. That's what we're hoping for."

We had picked the right spot. At 25,700 feet, they hit the Ellenberger formation, and were plugging the hole when the damn pipe broke and fell into the well. The drilling company spent two months trying to get the pipe out, and finally gave up. We sued them, but that didn't solve the problem.

We still hope to lease the land to investors who will bring in the big one. I want to get that gas out of the ground before I go into it!

### Politics

People used to ask me, "Are you a Democrat?"

And I'd say, "No."

"Are you a Republican?"

"No."

"So what are you?"

"Basically, I'm a Presbyterian."

Not long ago, I ran into a couple at the San Antonio Country Club. They said, "Mary McComb, do you remember us?" Since I've had a few minor strokes, my memory is not what it once was. I'm far too old to lie so I told them, "No."

They said, "Well, you ought to remember us because we worked together on five or six political campaigns. If it hadn't been for people like you, Allan Shivers would never have gotten elected governor."

Of course, that's been fifty years ago, but it was nice to know that a few people still remember. I come by politics naturally. My father was one of the best politicians in the state, and I learned the profession at his knee.

I was chief Democratic committeewoman for the state Democratic convention in Bexar County, when Allan Shivers was running against Ralph Yarborough for governor.

In 1952, Texas slowly began to change from a conservative Democratic state to a conservative Republican one. That's when Adlai Stevenson ran for president against Eisenhower. When Shivers met privately with Stevenson at the start of the campaign, Governor Shivers asked him if he intended to take the Tideland oil away from the State of Texas and give it to the federal government. Stevenson said, "Yes, that's what I'm going to do."

Eisenhower was for leaving the oil rights in state hands, so Shivers broke ranks and endorsed the Republican. And he took the state with him. Ike carried Texas in 1952, the first time the state voted for a Republican since Hoover beat Al Smith in 1928. And that was only because Smith was a Catholic and against prohibition, while Texas was Protestant and supposedly dry.

In 1952, we spent Thanksgiving with Governor Shivers and his wife, Mary Alice, at their place near College Station. We were in the middle of eating our turkey when an elderly black man who worked for Shivers came to the table and said, "Governor, you're wanted on the telephone." Allan spoke up and said, "Take the name and I'll call back later."



The man said, "No, sir, I think you'd better take it now." Allan said, "Why?"

"He says he's the President of the United States."

So the governor excused himself from the table and took the call, and when he came back he said that President-elect Eisenhower wanted to name him as ambassador to one of the South American countries.

Mary Alice spoke up and said, "If you go, you're going by yourself."

That ended that. Her folks, the Sherrys, were the people who started the citrus fruit industry down in the Valley. They had sixteen bedrooms in their house. It was called Sherryland, and located near McAllen. Mr. Sherry owned a tremendous amount of land, and Mary Alice was their only child, so she inherited it all.

When we visited them there, I asked, "Why in hell is the house so big?"

Mary Alice said that when her father was trying to sell land in the Valley, he brought in people from all over the country on special trains. Since there weren't any hotels, he had to put them up in his own house. No wonder they had so many bedrooms.

Allan never ran for a national office because of Mary Alice. She had so much property to look after that she didn't want to leave Texas. Allan would have liked going to Washington. He loved being at the center of things, surrounded by important people. But he couldn't have done it without a wife.

### Somebody Had to Say It

In 1991, I joined a tour group hosted by my friend, John Joseph, to visit Hong Kong, China and Japan. We were on a big tour bus, and when we went to Hiroshima, John told us, "Now don't give any of your opinions. Just listen." For some reason he was looking right at me when he said it.

We passed a large monument where a Japanese man is holding a dead body in his arms and pointing up to the sky with one finger.

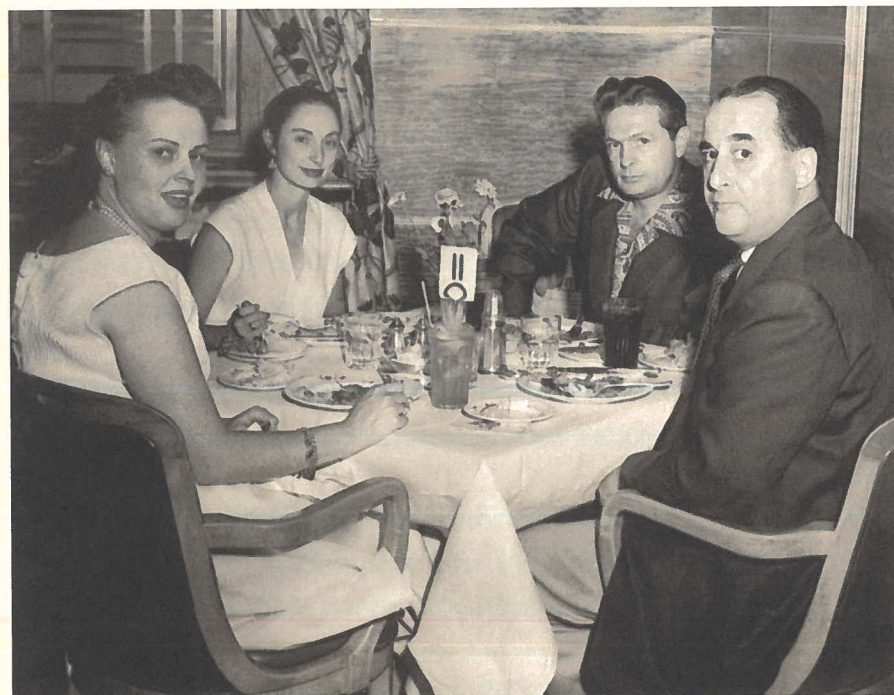
I said, "What do they call that statue? 'Screw the Americans'?" Our tour guide pretended not to hear me, which is not an easy thing to do.

The guide told us in somber tones how horrible it was when the bomb was dropped, and 100,000 people were killed instantly and thousands were terribly burned. By then I'd had it, and stood up by my bus seat and said, "I, too, think the bombing was a horrible thing. Let's hope that it never happens again. But we must never forget that American soldiers were bombed at Pearl Harbor. The only difference was that the United States was attacked when our two countries were at peace." The tour guide never said another word.

When I sat down at the back of the bus, everybody started clapping. Later on, the other members of the group told me, "I wish I'd had your guts."

It wasn't guts; it was the truth. We had to drop that bomb in order to avoid invading Japan, and save millions of American and Japanese lives.





*My close friend, Jane Sibley, and her husband, Dr. D.J. Sibley, join Asher and me for an evening on the town.*

## LIFE AT 86



I have opinions on just about everything, and now I'm going to unload a few of them on you.

### Friends

There is nothing more important in life than true, understanding friends. Throughout my life I have been blessed with friendships where I could be myself, uncensored and honest, warts and all.

Barbara Condos has been there for me through thick and thin. She's taken my calls in the middle of the night when I just needed to know somebody was there.

I've had a wonderful friendship with Jane Sibley for more than seventy years. Both our families are from Fort Stockton, and on the day I was born, December 16, 1917, her mother, Minnie Dunn, had a baby boy who died a few days later. Minnie kept his memory alive by taking a great interest in me and always celebrated my birthday. Jane was born ten years later and, though we were raised in different households, she seemed like a sister to me. Our friendship has spanned many decades and not a week goes by that we don't talk to each other.



### Baring It All

I don't understand the obsession with nudity in films and on stage. To be frank, I'm tired of seeing tits on television. Every place you look there are bosoms hanging out. Today's writers have substituted cleavage for cleverness.

I'll be the first to admit that I have used four-letter words on occasion. In fact, "shit" is among my favorite expletives. However, I don't believe foul language belongs on TV or in the movies. What we say in private is our own business, but why pay to hear it?

### Sex

I don't know what I think about couples living together before they get married. When I was growing up, sex was something that nobody did unless they were married. At least, that's what I was told. At the same time, there were a lot of "virgin births" because even then unmarried girls got pregnant.

I think sex is everybody's private business, and there's nothing the government should do about it. Everyone has different desires and life styles. When it comes to the bedroom, the government needs to mind its own business. At the same time, I believe strongly in birth control and the importance of limiting the size of your family.

I would hate to be raising a family today. It takes two people to make a living. Mothers and fathers sometimes work two jobs and pass each other like ships in the night. Most mothers don't have time to make lunches or go to PTA meetings or be Girl Scout leaders. I was fortunate to be a full-time mother.

### Traveling

Barbara Condos and I have been in shows together and we are both independent widows. We have traveled together many

times in the past. We love to go to New York and see the shows and museums and eat at the grand restaurants.

Up until recently, we shared a room to save on expenses, but now that I'm in my mid-eighties, I'm not much fun as a roommate. I don't always sleep well and have to get up in the middle of the night, and hate to inflict my habits on a traveling companion.

I'm afraid my best traveling days are behind me. I want to have the security of sleeping in my own bed and having full access to my own bathroom. The older you get, the more important simple comforts become. And that's all right. I feel like the old lady who was talking about her world travels. She pointed to the globe and said, "I've been there and done that." Well, I've been so many places and done so much that if I die tomorrow, I will depart with a basketful of memories.

### Heaven and Hell

People seem to worry a lot about the afterlife. Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Well, I believe in both of them – and I think most people find them here on this earth. As far as I know, all we have is the present moment. I'm not so sure about afterward. If there was a heaven and everybody went there when they died, don't you think it would be getting a little crowded by now? I know hell would be packed and I can name many of its inhabitants. But I won't.

I believe our spirit lives on, and we can give that spirit to other people. There are times I feel so close to my Dad, I could swear he was in the room with me. And the same is true with Asher. When you love someone, you can take a little of what you learned from them and keep it with you. I still quote my father's philosophy and enjoy the memory of Asher's sense of humor.





*Standing in front of my portrait in the living room.*

## I AM A SURVIVOR



I have been the recipient of good genes, good luck and a stubborn disposition. It's a good thing I have all three.

My first cancer operation was a melanoma on my right leg. They had to graft skin from my thigh. I had it done here in town and thought I'd checked cancer off my list. Boy, was I wrong.

The next year I was having my portrait painted by Herman DeJore and he kept tucking my dress down because I had ample breasts. After the painting was finished, the San Antonio Little Theater director said "We'd like to hang that painting in the lobby for the run of the show." And they did.

About six months later, I developed a lump in my breast, and the doctor said I needed a mastectomy. Six months later I was told the same thing about the other breast. I said, "Go ahead. One bosom doesn't do you any good."

Later, when we finally hung the portrait in the living room, people began commenting on it

"Is that painting of you?"

I'd say, "Yes, that's Mary McComb, W.T."



"What's that?"

"Mary McComb, with tits."

Surely, I thought, cancer is through with me. Once again I was mistaken. A few years later I began feeling tired and nauseated. The condition persisted for months, and eventually my doctor said that we should do a liver scan. It took a hell of a lot of nerve on his part to call me and say the scan had shown another malignancy. He recommended a local surgeon here in San Antonio who admitted that he had never done liver cancer surgery. He said, "I'll read up on it." Somehow that didn't reassure me.

Dr. Jim Pridgeon, a good friend of Asher's, had trained at the Mayo Clinic. When he heard about my liver cancer, he called and asked me to consider going there because liver cancer is so deadly, and few doctors had operated on it successfully. He said Mayo was the very best, and I'm here today to tell you that it is.

I called the girls and they agreed I should go to Mayo. Molly came to the hospital with me and stayed for two weeks. Then Margaret was with me at the hotel while I was getting outpatient treatment, and brought me back to Texas.

When I bought that plane ticket to Mayo, I thought I would only need a one-way fare. Fortunately, I was wrong and had a complete recovery. That has been almost fourteen years ago. The people from Mayo still call to check up on me and can't believe that I'm still alive. Some days neither can I.

In the last few years, I've had two little passing-out spells where I've fallen. The doctor said they were minor strokes, and I think they were the Lord's way of trying to slow me down. As usual, the Lord succeeded – to an extent.

One of my most painful experiences was caused by a Volkswagen. On July 4th weekend, 1950, we were heading to Fort Stockton. We had just gotten Margaret and wanted to show her to family and friends. She was in a portable bed in the back seat of the car. It was raining and the roads were slippery, and there was a big truck in front of us that Asher couldn't get around.

Finally, he found a clear spot to pass, and got halfway around the truck when he saw a little VW that had been hidden from view. Asher had to slam on the brakes fast, and we started sliding and hit the side of a bridge. I went through the windshield, came back, and then went out again, as if I couldn't make my mind up where I was going.

Asher's knees hit the dashboard, and the impact knocked his hip bone out of its socket. As he got out of the car to pick up Margaret, who had been thrown from the car and was lying in the road, his hip went back into the socket. He said later that he felt as if he had been struck by lightning. One of the passers-by had called an ambulance, and they got there fast. Miraculously, Margaret had no broken bones and was perfectly okay.

They started to take us to the Kerrville hospital, but Asher said that we had to go where we could get a plastic surgeon to sew up my face or I'd never speak to him again. He was right.

I've survived five cancer operations and recovered from two knee replacements and a terrible car wreck. I've had work done on my face and my eyes. I believe I've had everything but a tattoo. And if I was twenty, I might get one of those.





## LEAVE THEM WANTING MORE



Thank you for giving me a chance to share my stories. If you've gotten this far, I must have done something right.

It's time for me to draw this to a close. I'm a great believer in the saying, "A person who talks about herself and doesn't give the others a chance to talk about themselves is a great bore." That's the last thing I want to be.

I'd like to end where I began – with gratitude to my parents for giving me the gift of life.





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my daughters, Margaret and Molly, for their encouragement, support, fact-checking and good spelling.

Jerry Letch had the idea for this book. In fact, he talked about it for so long that I had to do it to shut him up. And I'm so glad that I did.

Jerry's daughter-in-law, Jennifer Letch, came up with the perfect title, and I am grateful for her creativity.



